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Social and human rights questions: advancement of women and human rights

Statement submitted by the World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The World Veterans Federation (WVF), founded in 1950 by war veterans and war victims, today has over 27 million members located in 74 countries in every continent. Recognizing that war and armed conflicts can affect women differently from men and may require different responses, WVF in 1984 created a Standing Committee on Women to address the issues regarding women and children in armed conflicts. From that time, WVF has participated actively in all the key United Nations conferences and policy initiatives that advance the status of women worldwide.

WVF has worked closely with the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Secretariat in the preparations for the Beijing Conference and provided considerable input to the drafting of the Beijing Platform for Action in the critical areas in which it has special expertise. This year WVF contributed substantially to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-second session, when it covered the focal points human rights of women, violence against women, women and armed conflict and the girl child. WVF suggested that especially the first three – although in many cases all four – of the focal points are intertwined. Violence against women, which is prevalent in armed conflicts, certainly violates the human rights of women. Girl children are especially vulnerable to this violence.

Reviewing "women and armed conflict", the numbers of women and children casualties of armed conflicts in today's wars are much greater than in earlier wars; in fact, they outnumber those of combatants. They include the war disabled, mine victims, refugees and the internally displaced, widows and orphans, unaccompanied children, wives of the disabled, internees of concentration and labour camps and raped, sexually abused and exploited women.

Recent violence, including ethnic cleansing against civilians in the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, has turned international attention to the horrors perpetrated against women in internal conflicts. Unlike the Nuremberg or Tokyo war crimes, rape is on the docket of the ad hoc international tribunals at The Hague and Arusha. For the first time, sexual violence against women during armed conflicts will be prosecuted. The International Criminal Court that came into being at the United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Rome, which recognized crimes of sexual violence, will serve as a deterrent for future violence.

WFV wishes to call attention to a gender-related human rights catastrophe dating back to the Second World War, which has never been resolved – that of the rape and forced sexual slavery of the 200,000 or more "comfort women" from the countries of Asia that were overrun by the warring Japanese Imperial Army bent on conquest and subjugation. Many of the women died from the harsh treatment; those who survived were so physically and psychologically scarred that they were never able to lead normal lives. Many never married; many could not have children. Terribly shamed by their experiences, the "comfort women" remained silent for years. Finally, some historians came across references to such events and, in 1992, one of the "comfort women" spoke out. Various human rights and legal groups in the Republic of Korea, Japan and other countries unearthed more information and became strong advocates for the women.

The Special Rapporteur appointed by the United Nations Committee on Human Rights several years ago investigated the reports that had begun to surface and verified the monstrosity of the crimes committed against these innocent women, many of whom were still girls as young as 13 years of age. What the Special Rapporteur found was that the Government of Japan itself had created and administered the "comfort stations" and organized the kidnapping and abduction of the women. The report of the Special Rapporteur concluded that the Government of Japan had both a legal and moral obligation towards the women kept in forced military sexual slavery. To date neither an official apology nor reparations have been forthcoming from that Government.

At its twenty-second General Assembly , in November 1997, the World Veterans Federation passed a resolution on the "Human rights of women in war time", which spoke out forcefully on behalf of the "comfort women":

> "Condemning all violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict,
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> "Noting that the women in question are getting older and have serious medical and financial problems, and that furthermore, many are dying,
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> "Strongly urges the authorities involved to urgently pursue their action with a view to fully meeting these expectations,
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> "Expresses the hope that in the near future all the countries in the world will have to participate and seek proper and effective responses through the United Nations and specialized agencies and the international non-governmental organizations concerned to eliminate the violation of the rights of women in war time, emphasizing the need for appropriate systems and special compensation for the victims ...".

Another resolution passed by the WVF General Assembly entitled "Victims of war and human rights" observed with satisfaction that "women in armed conflicts" would be one of the four themes to be focused on at the 1998 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, and supported the Optional Protocol to the important human rights instrument, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which would allow individuals and groups the right to petition, thereby enhancing the protection of the human rights of women.

In another resolution on "Children in armed conflicts", the WVF noted "that the United Nations report on the impact of armed conflict on children (the Machel Report (A/51/306)) gives full details of the abuse and exploitation of millions of children during armed conflicts today and that they represent half of the new civilian victims of war, who suffer devastating, long-lasting possible lifetime effects of those war experiences ...". The resolution also noted "that the report reveals the widespread forced recruitment of children under the age of 18, mostly boys but including some girls, into military service which often results in these children actually taking part in the fighting and sometimes in atrocities". Member associations of the Federation were asked "to urge their governments to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child and also to support the Optional Protocol which would change the minimum age for military service to 18".

Based on its long-standing commitment to improving the status and situation of women and its support for the work of the United Nations world conferences on women, the World Veterans Federation supports the conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women on critical areas of concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action.[1] WVF especially calls attention to the section on "Women and armed conflict". WVF is gratified that the Commission called upon Governments, non-governmental organizations and the public and private sectors, to take actions that "support the work of non-governmental organizations in their activities to prevent, combat and eliminate violence against women".[2]

Referring to the report on the follow-up and implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (E/1998/53), WVF applauds the report of the Commission on the Status of Women's work in 1998, detailed in section II. WVF is especially pleased with paragraph 25, which calls upon Governments to "provide accessible and gender-sensitive avenues of redress for victims of armed conflict through legal drafting, as well as interpretation of existing international and domestic legal provisions which apply in situations of armed conflict, including in the context of the International Criminal Court. Rape, systematic rape and sexual slavery in armed conflict should be reaffirmed as constituting war crimes, and existing legal standards and definitions should be modified to reflect that understanding".

WVF urges the Economic and Social Council to adopt the conclusions and recommendations included in the reports mentioned above.

Notes

[1] E/1998/27, chap. I, draft resolution IV.

[2] Ibid., sect. I.B.